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10th Anniversary of September 11: Fostering Optimism and Resilience

The 10th Anniversary of September 11, 2001 presents a unique opportunity to reinforce children's natural resilience and optimism and help them to see themselves as a positive force in their world, even in the face of adversity. September 11 was the beginning of a difficult time for the country in terms of war, economic problems, and natural disasters. Yet the American people have proven extremely resilient. Individuals and communities are adapting, coping, and reaching out to help each other.

These are important lessons for our children. Adversity is a natural part of life. Yet we can all learn to deal with difficulties if we understand and engage the basic elements of resilience and optimism. Adults can help nurture these qualities in children and actually foster their growth and the skills to be more resilient in the future. Following are simple ways to promote resilience in children and help protect them from long-term ill effects of difficult experiences.

1. **Think positive!** Modeling positive attitudes and positive emotions is very important. Optimism is a necessary component of resilience and optimistic thinking can be learned. Children need to hear adults thinking out loud positively and being determined to persist until a goal is achieved. Using a "can do" approach to solving problems teaches children a sense of power and promise.
2. **Show love and gratitude!** Emotions such as love and gratitude increase resilience. Praise should always occur much more often than criticism. Children and adolescents who are cared for, loved, and supported learn to express positive emotions to others. Adults at home and school are important contributors to a sense of being valued. Positive support and emotions buffer kids against depression and other negative reactions to adversity.
3. **Express yourself!** Resilient people appropriately express all emotions, even negative ones. Adults who help kids become more aware of emotions, label emotions appropriately, and help children deal with upsetting events are giving them useful life skills. Keep in mind that children, particularly young children, look to adults for cues on how to respond to events and challenges. Your attitude and reactions will shape those of the children in your care.
4. **Foster competency!** Making sure that children and adolescents achieve academically is great protection against adversity. Children who achieve academic success and who develop individual talents such as playing sports, drawing, making things, playing musical instruments, or playing games are much more likely to feel competent and be able to deal with stress positively.

5. **Stay connected.** Social competency is also important. Having friends and staying connected to friends and loved ones can increase resilience. Being part of positive group experiences and belief systems, such as after school clubs, faith-based communities, and volunteer organizations, can contribute to a sense of connectedness as well.
6. **Focus on strengths!** Help children focus their own competencies in terms of their daily life and in other difficult times. Help them identify what they have done in the past that helped them cope when they were frightened or upset. Identify examples of positive things Americans are doing to help others. Also remind them that the country has weathered many crises throughout history and has emerged stronger each time.
7. **Get involved!** Contributing to the community or country helps us feel more in control and builds sense of connection and resilience. Children and youth can help families in the community who have a parent deployed and may need babysitting, errands run, or yard work; write letters or send care packages to our troops; tutor students who need extra help; or volunteer to help communities affected by natural disasters.
8. **Get fit!** Good physical health prepares the body and mind to be more resilient. Healthy eating habits, regular exercise, and adequate sleep protect kids against the stress of tough situations. Regular exercise also decreases negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, and depression.
9. **Limit screen time!** Too much time watching television, playing video games, or surfing the Internet is not good for us physically or mentally. Such passive activity detracts from time children could be engaged in activities that build real life competencies, connections, and resilience. Also, during the anniversary period, children could also be exposed to disturbing images.

Protecting our children against all of life's unexpected painful events is not possible. Giving them a sense of competency and the skills to face adverse circumstances can be a valuable legacy of all caring adults. Resilience can be built by understanding these important foundations. The more we practice these approaches; the better able our children will be to weather whatever life brings.

Adapted from "Resiliency: Strategies for Parents and Educators" (S5-79), by Virginia Smith Harvey. In A. S. Canter, L. Z. Paige, M. D. Roth, I. Romero, & S. A. Carroll (Eds.), *Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts for Families and Educators*, 2004, Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. Adapted with permission.

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